



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

And finally...big data

Citation for published version:

Fuller, M 2020, 'And finally...big data', *Expository Times*, vol. 131, no. 5, pp. 234-234.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524619854332>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1177/0014524619854332](https://doi.org/10.1177/0014524619854332)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Expository Times

Publisher Rights Statement:

The final version of this paper has been published in The Expository Times, 27 January 2020, by SAGE Publications Ltd, All rights reserved. © Michael Fuller, 2020. It is available at:
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0014524619854332>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



And Finally ...: Big Data

Anyone who uses a computer to shop online, keep in touch with others via social media, or for any other purpose, will be aware of the adverts which accompany all such activity. Sometimes such ads might appear quite random: more often they will link to something else we have done online. Viewing or buying something on a website like Amazon, for example, will generate ads for similar commodities – ‘if you liked this, then why not try ...’. Indeed, it’s reckoned that something like one-third of Amazon’s sales are generated by such means, suggesting that this kind of advertising is found useful by customers, as well as being hugely beneficial for Amazon.

There’s an obvious issue here, in that if people simply followed blindly in the directions advertisers identify based on their past activity, they would end up by cutting themselves off from new, and potentially horizon-broadening, experiences. But there are other, less obvious, issues which attend our inputting information about ourselves on the internet.

A couple of months ago I began to receive advertisements for hotels in Oban. I often receive such ads based on bookings I have made to travel to various places; but I had made no such booking for Oban. However, my wife had, as she planned to visit there with one of our children.

My wife has a different surname to me, and we have separate online accounts for our various internet purchases. My guess is that I was targeted with ads which her online activity generated because we share the same postal address. But this trivial incident surfaces two important aspects of the phenomenon that is known as Big Data.

The first is that all data which you input may readily be linked to other data. Datasets can be combined, and it is surprisingly straightforward to identify (and to target) individuals through such cross-linking of data.

The second is the phenomenon known as ‘data brokerage’. The information you surrender when you use online services – and there is a lot of it – is a valuable commodity, and trading in it has become a multi-billion dollar industry. Those forms many of us found ourselves filling in recently in order to comply with the new E.U. General Data Protection Regulation may have been annoying, but they should protect us from at least some of the invasions which become possible through the spread of data harvesting and consequent data (mis)use.

The widespread use of computers has brought us all many huge benefits, and I am constantly grateful for how much easier so many aspects of our lives now are, thanks to the internet. But there are significant downsides to this activity, too, as our privacy is eroded and our consent or otherwise to the use of our data becomes increasingly meaningless. Perhaps these are things of which to be aware every time we cross our fingers and tick a box to say we have read the relevant terms and conditions on a website. And at the risk of appearing technophobic, I will always treat with the utmost caution any data-harvesting device to which is applied the epithet ‘smart’.